Folklore—Illuminating Then and Now: Archival Materials Become an Exhibit

Kristi A. Bell

Folklore archives are treasure troves of wonderful information documenting our heritage. But they are often neglected. Many folklorists want to do their own fieldwork, and they only begin to consider the role of archives when retirement looms near. Others see archives as great alternative places to house their students' fieldwork without filling up their own file cabinets. Folklore archivists are often squirreled away in odd office spaces making sense out of unorganized materials submitted at irregular intervals. Once the items are organized and cataloged and ready for eager researchers, how does a folklore archivist get the message out to the public? An exhibit seemed like the answer.

There were three of us working on the project—Jill Terry Rudy, then director of the Wilson Folklore Archives; Shaun McMurdie, exhibits manager for the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University; and myself, the curator of the Wilson Folklore Archives. The Lee Library has a well-defined process for getting on to the exhibits schedule. We dutifully filled out our exhibit worksheets and scoured the deepest recesses of the folklore archives for material. We also thought to search the L. Tom Perry Special Collections' book collection for related material. We struck gold. Examples purchased by Special Collections included a 1775 edition of *Popular Antiquities* and the papers of Louise Pound, including her hand-written dissertation for the University of Heidelberg. We folklorists benefited from an eclectic collecting policy of an earlier chair of Special Collections.

After working on the exhibit for about 14 months, we felt we were in pretty good shape. The materials were selected, some captions had been written, but we had no idea how to present them. How do you turn a stack of student projects, some old books, and a few aging

manuscripts into something people would want to spend time perusing? We knew that we especially wanted to make the student projects come alive. We had made arrangements to borrow a few material culture items associated with the projects; however, no matter how much we deliberated, we couldn't come up with an appealing presentation that would tell the story that we wanted told.

Six weeks away from our original deadline we added to our team Mark Pollei, department chair of conservation at the Lee Library. Pollei headed up the exhibits team before McMurdie came to BYU, and we felt that his experience might help us to get a fresh perspective and provide us impetus to give form to what seemed rather nebulous. I'll never forget Mark's first visit to my office. We showed him the books we had selected and then turned to the student projects. With utter horror on his face he said, "You're not planning on using these in the exhibit, are you?" However, after we explained the richness of the content, he saw the folders in a new light. By themselves, they weren't appealing exhibit items, but if we could bring the collected folklore to life for the exhibit, and then we would really have something.

As we worked on the exhibit we kept in mind the archives' mission statement:

> Committed to collecting and preserving folklore, the William A. Wilson Folklore Archives focuses on families, religious life of Latter-day Saints, university students, and regional life in the Intermountain West.

Since we already were dedicated to the idea of presenting folklore as a vibrant, active discipline—not just fairy tales gathered by the Grimms and the old wives' tales focusing on home remedies—we wanted a presentation that would be interpretive of what was currently going on in folklore while acknowledging the past that gave birth to modern folklore studies and methods. As Willard B. Moore discusses in "Connecting the Past with the Present: Reflections upon Interpretation in Folklife Museums," museums, or in our case, library exhibits, should "strive primarily to interpretive programs" and not miss "the opportunity to connect the past with the present."[1]

Harold B. Lee Library's exhibit manager, Shaun McMurdie asserts that most university libraries have treasures no one would ever know about without exhibits. He also sees exhibits as one way to fulfill the dual mission of Special Collections to both preserve items while allowing access. One of the many challenges that we faced both academically and archivally was that Special Collections isn't a place that pops into the mind when someone thinks about museums or museum-type exhibits. We wanted to put together an exhibit that met all of our goals but that also would attract viewers. At times it seemed a daunting task.

In "Unsettling the Meaning: Critical Museology, Art and Anthropological Discourses," Anthony Shelton notes that "exhibition strategies must therefore begin with the excavation of the schemes underlying conventional museum representations before they can begin to make explicit their own practice."[2] We felt comfortable with our analysis of what should be presented and what measures needed to be undertaken to preserve the materials while they were on display, but we still struggled with how. How do you take a medium-sized, beige-walled room and transform it into a visually appealing representation of folklore? As Shelton notes, "design is, of course, an important element in that transformation."[3]

In January we received an extension on the deadline and a new member for our team, a student in graphic design named David Dibble. David took our tenuous design ideas and made them firm. He also came up with the title of the exhibit and a simple, adaptable color scheme. And over 300 hours of work later, we had an exhibit that made our vision a reality.

Dibble, McMurdie, and Pollei settled on a design scheme that utilized exhibit panels as walls to create discrete spaces focusing on specific elements of the larger theme. While we knew the finished product would appear simple, in reality it would involve a tremendous amount of work and ingenuity. The library's exhibit committee told us that our vision was too grand, and there would be absolutely no way that we could accomplish what we had in mind—we set out to prove the impossible. Through trial and error and plenty of late nights, we eventually mounted an exhibit which both professional folklorists and those unfamiliar with the discipline enjoyed.

Figure 1: Student Projects as Focal Point *(photo: Wilson Archives)*

The center of the room was organized around silk panels with the title of the exhibit screen printed on them. Representing the four main colors of the exhibit, they created a diamond shape marked by student projects and materials. Thus the central component of our archive—student projects—became physically the center of the exhibit (figure 1). One length of the exhibit room opened into the foyer and as a result was open space. We used the two widths of the room to trace the historical development of folklore as a recognized discipline touching upon the familiar fairy tales, looking at ethnography among "primitive" peoples, and displaying the tools of the folklorist—recording machines, notebooks etc., and highlighting folklorists Louise Pound, Thomas Cheney, and particularly William A. Wilson (figure 2).

Three distinct nooks along the remaining length of the room represented everyday folklore encountered and studied by students. The first scene, which we entitled Families: Tradition in Everyday Life, was a kitchen complete with a full size refrigerator, a small table, and a window with a view of a local mountain. On one wall hung some homemade samplers, a kitchen wall quilt and folk art trivets representing the material culture used to decorate kitchens. The focal point, however, were the items displayed on the refrigerator and

the variety of magnets used to hold them in place. Several students previously completed projects on how and why the space on the front of a refrigerator was utilized for display purposes.

The inspiration for the second recessed area came from a project on how teens adorn the insides of their school lockers. Using high school students as models, we plastered the walls with life-size photos of lockers at a local high school with a boy and a girl leaning against them talking. Against the photos we put a small bank of lockers. Two locker doors were open and displayed items that might be used by a girl and a boy to make their lockers reflect their interests and personality. We also used the wall space above the lockers and one locker itself to illustrate a popular local custom—creative date invitations. We were fortunate to find a high school girl who was willing to put together the locker décor and creative invitation for us. This section of the exhibit provided community involvement and was a favorite with many of those who viewed the exhibit.

The final alcove was a closet filled with men's ties. While the ties brought to life a project done on the stories behind the ties that men won't throw away, this section also represented the varying ways in which clothing plays a part in folk traditions and narratives.

Figure 2: Highlighting William A. Wilson (photo: Wilson Archives)

The four centerpieces in the room illustrated individual student projects, which in turn represented images typical of a larger folk tradition. A project on a mother-in-law's quilts was complete with the wedding quilt she had made for the collector and her husband when they married. Another vignette featured a panel-sized wedding photo of a couple (figure 3). The veil the bride wore has been handed down, and her descendants continue to use it and fashion it to fit their personalities. We were fortunate to be able to borrow the veil from the family, although the veil was absent from its case twice during the exhibit to appear in family weddings.

The third case held homemade dolls, which were arranged in folkloric vignettes like judging pickles at a state fair, or a grandmother teaching her young granddaughter to quilt. The final of the four center displays acknowledged the role that students studying abroad make to the archives. Brigham Young University's Kennedy Center provides opportunities for students to travel and study abroad in the International Field Study and Internship program. One of the BYU courses they may take is Introduction to Folklore. The students' field projects focus on the folklore of the area where they are studying. The case contained a variety of folkloric items brought back by some of these students.

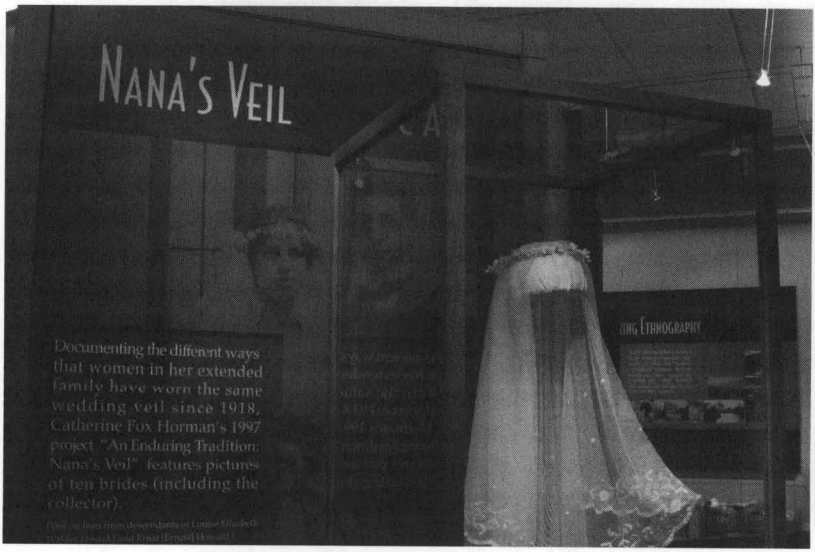

Figure 3: Student Project on Family Veil *(photo: Wilson Archives)*

Often folklore archives are like our original exhibit ideas—vague, dreamy, and somewhat inaccessible to anyone other than the archivist. As curators and archivists, we have a responsibility not only to preserve our materials, but to make them available. And beyond availability comes application. We hoped that our exhibit would enable those who previously thought of folklore as something that didn't impact their daily lives to begin to see the scope of folklore and its relevance to their lives.

Comments written in a guest book from the exhibit indicate some success:

> I never thought about "folklore." I always just associated it with storytelling, and not so much other traditions. It opened my eyes to things I never would have considered tradition.
>
> When I think of folklore I think of ancient cultures. I had no idea how much our own lives today are based around folklore. This was very interesting!
>
> The whole exhibit was fascinating. I learned quite a bit about folklore and saw it from angles that I hadn't perceived before. I enjoyed it very much, and I am grateful for the effort expended in preparing it.[5]

We feel like the exhibit accomplished what we set out to do—educate the public that folklore isn't relegated to the past or to the quaint. As Louis Jones and Candace Matelic put it in their essay "Folklife and Museums," sometimes "the typical might well be more important than the unique."[4] Folklore surrounds us. Exhibits are a tool to help demonstrate how prevalent it is in everyday life. A picture, an artifact, good graphic design, and well-written, concise captions teach concepts more effectively than a lecture. Or as one exhibit viewer put it,

> One of the best things about this exhibit is it helped me to cherish who 'we' are as a culture, who I am and who other peoples are as well. It reminded me of the 'preciousness' of life.[6]

Notes

1. Hall, Patricia and Charlie Seeman, eds. 1997. *Folklife and Museums: Selected Readings*. Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History. 52-53.

2. Bouquet, Mary, ed. 2001. *Academic Anthropology and the Museum: Back to the Future*. New York: Berghan Books. 150.

3. Ibid. 165

4. Hall and Seemann, 5.

5. *Folklore: Illuminating Then and Now* exhibit comment book.

6. Ibid.